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KT photo | **Tim Bath**

House of Burgess: The GOP clown car rides again

Fifteen candidates spar for four hours in two debates

By Rob Burgess
Tribune columnist

After squeezing 17 candidates into two debates Aug. 6, the Republican presidential field shrunk by one Sept. 11. Former Texas Gov. Rick Perry announced at the Eagle Forum in St. Louis he would no longer be eyeing the White House in 2016 through his new glasses. And while the rules of the first debate allowed all announced GOP candidates a platform, CNN and Salem Media Group decided their Sept. 16 debate in the Air Force One Pavilion at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley,

California, would require at least a 1 percent poll showing, leaving out former Virginia Gov. Jim Gilmore.

UNDERCARD

This format made slightly more sense when there were seven in the undercard debate and 10 in prime time. Now, there were only four (former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum, South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham, Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal and former New York Gov. George Pataki) in the first, and 11 in the second.

Why not have three one-hour rounds of five candidates each? This event stretched four hours, an hour longer than before. In an improvement, the undercard audience was the same as the prime time. Pataki took a strong stand for judicial review as established by Marbury v. Madison. Santorum compared Rowan County, Kentucky, clerk Kim Davis to Martin Luther King Jr. Both Santorum and Jindal supported scrapping the Supreme Court altogether.

Losers: None of these four are going to be the candidate.

Highlight: “That’s the first thing I’m going to do as president, we’re going to drink more," said Graham.

PRIMETIME

Moderators Jake Tapper, Dana Bash and Hugh Hewitt were committed to pitting the candidates against each other, but failed repeatedly to correct their blatant lies. (Fox News had actually excelled at this during the previous debate.)

Santorum repeated the phony Columbine Christian martyr story about Cassie Bernall unchallenged. (Read Dave Cullen’s excellent book, “Columbine,” for more.) Former Hewlett Packard CEO Carly Fiorina described nonexistent scenes in the Planned Parenthood videos. Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush said his brother, former President George W. Bush, “kept us safe.” (9/11 doesn't count?) Former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee and others in party of Abraham Lincoln seemed ready to mangle the 14th Amendment. And the irony of Texas Sen. Ted Cruz dismissing negotiations with Iran at the Reagan Library of all places was almost too much to bear.

Donald Trump was once again front and center, still able to steal the spotlight. He made some interesting faces while others were speaking and awkwardly high-fived neighbors Dr. Ben Carson and Bush. Like last time, he effectively attacked Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul throughout the night.

Fiorina continued her winning streak, scoring a seat at the main event after her stellar debut performance. While she and Trump argued over who was the worse businessperson, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie pretended to take the high road. He played hard to the crowd, and, as expected, constantly invoked 9/11.

Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, Carson and Ohio Gov. John Kasich held steady, which was as good as a win. Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker's decision to drop out of the race Monday was understandable given his lackluster performances.

Winners: Trump, Rubio, Carson, Fiorina, Kasich.

Losers: Walker, Bush, Paul, Huckabee, Christie, Cruz.

Highlights: The candidates picked who should be on the $10 bill: Paul – Susan B. Anthony; Huckabee – his wife, Janet; Rubio – Rosa Parks; Carson – his mother, Sonya; Trump – his daughter, Ivanka, or Parks; Bush – Margaret Thatcher ("Probably illegal, but what the heck?"); Walker – Clara Barton; Fiorina – no change ("Women are not a special interest group."); Kasich – Mother Teresa; and Christie – Abigail Adams.

They also picked their Secret Service code names: Christie – True Heart, Kasich – Unit One, Fiorina – Secretariat, Walker – Harley, Bush – Ever Ready, Carson – One Nation, Cruz – Cohiba (and Angel for his wife), Rubio – Gator, Huckabee – Duck Hunter, and Paul – Justice Never Sleeps.

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